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Gulf Migration: During and Aftermath COVID 19



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GULF MIGRATION: DURING AND AFTERMATH COVID 19

Rakesh Ranjan, Rachid Lamghari & Zohra Hassani



Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism

H.No. 61, Behind Harijan Choupal, Maidan Garhi, South Delhi, 110068,

Email: contact@grfdt.org, Contact: +91-9818602718

Website- www.grfdt.org, Facebook- www.facebook.com/diaspora.transnationalism

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Gulf Migration: During and Aftermath COVID 19

Rakesh Ranjan, Rachid Lamghari & Zohra Hassani

Executive Summary

Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism, a Delhi based international research consortium, organized a virtual panel discussion on “Gulf Migration: During and Aftermath COVID 19” on 27 May 2020. The Panel was organized virtually using ‘Zoom’ online seminar application.

Mr. Shabari Nath Nair moderated the Panel, Labour Migration Specialist from International Labour Organization Decent Work Team, South Asia. Seven experts from different parts of the world were invited to share their views on the impact of COVID 19 pandemic on Gulf Migration.

The panel speakers were, Dr. AKM Ahsan Ullah from the University of Brunei Darussalam, Brunei, Prof. S. Irudaya Rajan from Centre for Development Studies, India, Dr. Ganesh Gurung from Nepal Institute of Development Studies, Nepal, Prof. Nasra M. Shah from Lahore School

of Economics, Pakistan, Dr. Bilesha Weeraratne from Institute of Policy Studies, Sri Lanka, Dr. Froilan Malit Jr. from University of Cambridge, UK and Prof. Andrew Gardner from University of Puget Sound, USA.

Five hundred sixty-nine people from around 50 countries in the world attended and actively participated in the webinar. The participants were broadly from academia, civil society organizations, and national governments.

The Panel broadly focused on ten different issues during the discussion: reintegration of returnee migrants, evacuation of migrant workers, the impact of COVID 19 on remittances, COVID 19 and labour condition in the Gulf, migrant support from the home country, state preparedness and returnees, COVID 19 and gender, irregular migration, migration statistics, re-migration.

Keywords: COVID 19, Gulf Migration, Labour Migration, Migration Policy, COVID 19 Crisis

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1. Assistant Professor, Centre for Development Practice and Research, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India. Email- rakesh.ranjan@tiss.edu
 2. Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fes, Morocco. Email- rachidlamgh@gmail.com
 3. Master’s in Public policy from Sciences Po , France. Email- zohra.hassani@sciencespo.fr

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Note: Views expressed are of author(s).

The rehabilitation and reintegration of returnee migrants is a need of today. COVID 19 will bring back several workers from Gulf countries, and therefore having robust reintegration policies in all sending countries is indispensable.

Migrants stranded in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are in dire need of support from home governments. Sending governments should prepare an effective strategy to facilitate a quicker and safer return. However, there may be cases in which many migrants refuse to return; in such cases, their condition needs to be monitored.

Assumingly, there is going to be a decline of 20-30 percent remittances, and millions of workers are at the risk of losing their jobs in the Gulf countries. This crisis is manifested in joblessness, among other things, will significantly create distress, which, however, can be eluded should a mechanism whose primary concern is to aid workers to be formulated.

COVID 19 is not only a case of joblessness in Gulf countries. Three major factors have changed the employability in the Gulf, which is the ever-increasing nationalist policy of Gulf states, the volatile oil market, and the ongoing COVID 19 crisis.

The pandemic will significantly affect the entire foundational logic of urbanism. There is an enclaving and segregation in the urban space of the Gulf that is very common in the form of migrants' labor camps. That kind of segregation seems exceptionally problematic.

The return of Gulf migrants is supposed to have a significant impact on the labour market. However, the labour market stress may not be more prolonged since the post-corona world is supposed to be more migration-centric, and the rise of economic stress will act as a push factor for workers.

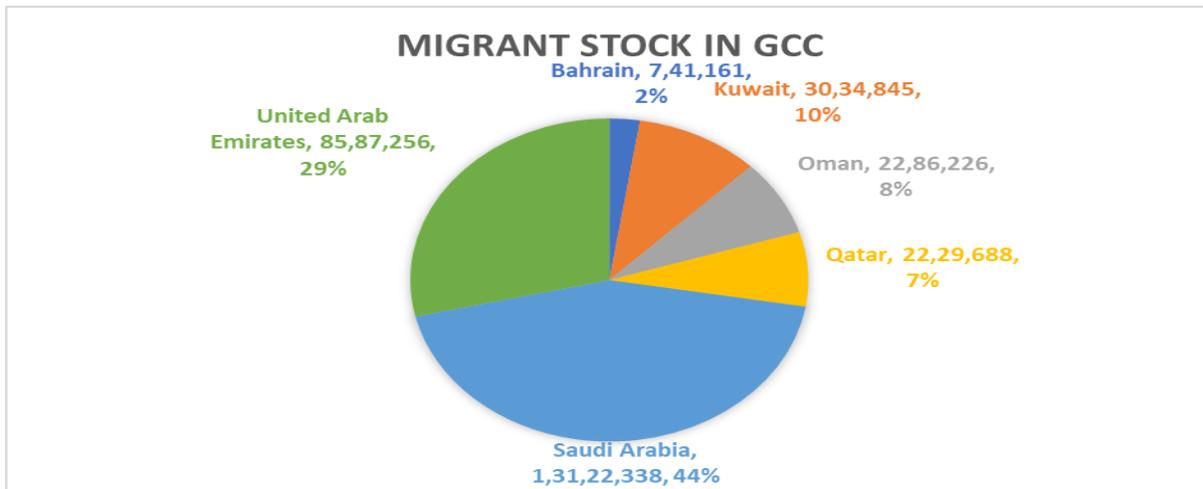
Undocumented workers in this era of a pandemic have become more vulnerable. Now with the occurrence of the COVID 19 pandemic, those in an uncertain status will face risk and an uncertain future.

The restrictive mobility of domestic workers usually makes them vulnerable; however, in this era of social distancing and lack of communication with the outside world, it is also a positive right that isolates them from the kind of crowded conditions that many other south Asian migrants encounter in the Gulf.

The Panel was attended by participants from various organizations such as; Migrant Care, International Labour Organization, Migration Research Development and Society of Bangladesh, International Organizations from Migration-Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Migrant-Rights.org, Lawyers Beyond Borders India Chapter, Citizens for Public Leadership, Migrant Workers Protection Society, Bahrain, Winrock International, International Justice Mission, India Migration Now, Emigrants Welfare Forum, POURAKHI Nepal, Berai Import Export Inc, SEWA, Cross-Regional Center for Refugees and Migrants (CCRM), Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK), Migrant Forum in Asia, Equidem Research and Consulting, National Workers Welfare Trust, Centre for Indian Migrant Studies, Our Journey, Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee (PNCC), Center for migrant advocacy, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Migrant Roots Media, Asian Forum, Migrants Rights Council India, Caritas India, International Organization of Employers, National Human Rights Commission, Nepal, Global Migration Policy Associates, and many other policy advocacy, non-governmental organizations, universities and research organizations.

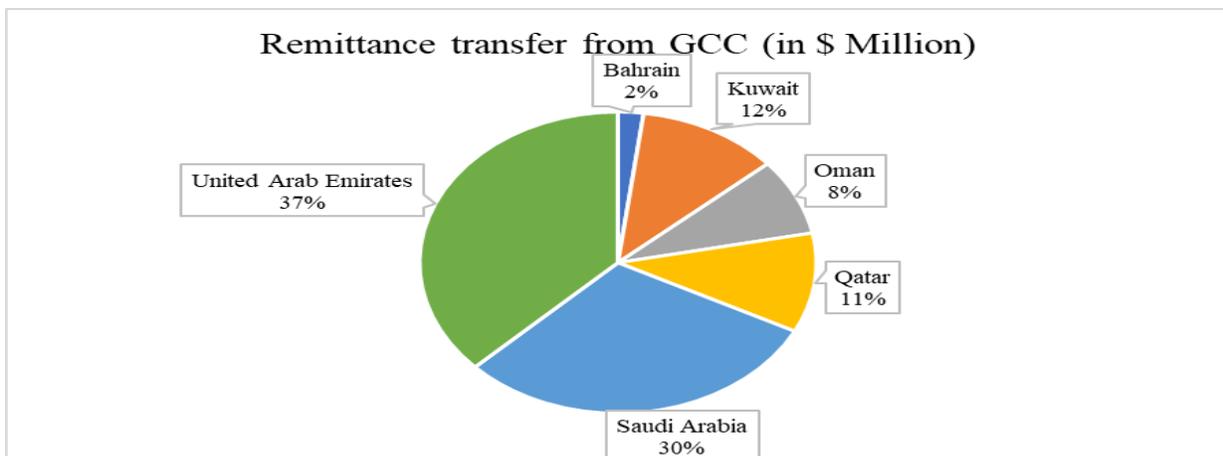
Introduction

Uncertainty is the new normal. However, the flow of people, ideas, and capital is occurring at breathtaking speed in human history in contemporary times. With the onslaught of COVID 19, there is a massive movement of people again, though mostly towards their home countries. The virus has the potential to severely affect nearly 272 million cross border migrants (World Migration Report, 2020) and 25 million refugees in the world (UNHCR, 2020). Estimates suggest that GCC countries host 35 million migrant workers, 31 percent of them are women (Population Division, United Nations Department of Economic Affairs, 2019).



Source: Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic Affairs, 2019).

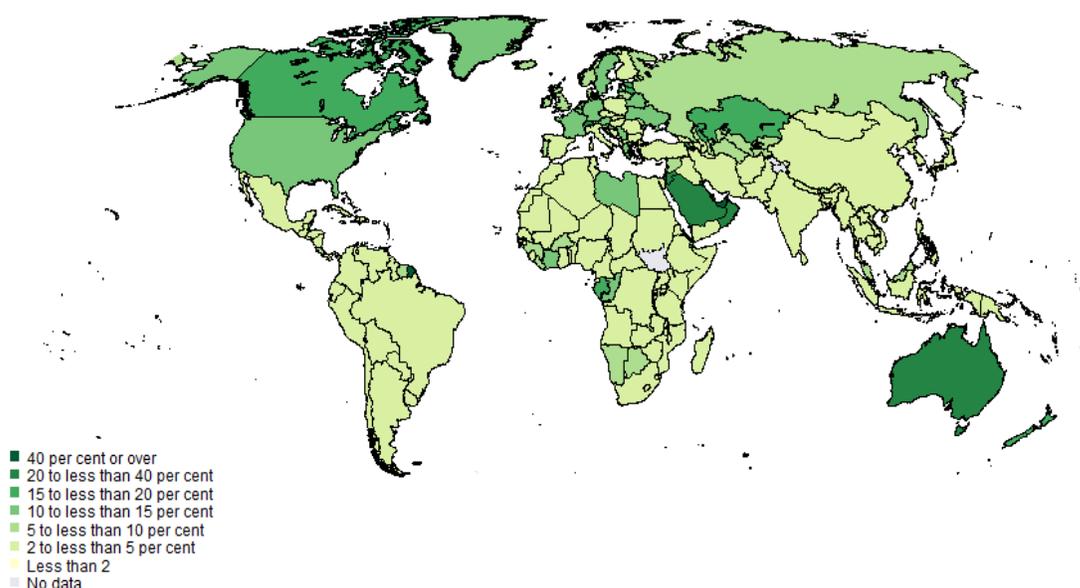
The majority of these migrants work in the construction, oil, and domestic sectors. Those in the six GCC states account for over 10 percent of all migrants globally. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates host the third and fifth largest migrant populations in the world, respectively. In 2018, GCC contributed to 17 percent of global remittances, mainly to South Asia. It is estimated that the global remittances may see a decrease of up to 20 percent, which is expected to affect the household level economy of many sending countries significantly.



Source: KNOMAD, 2020

From 2013 to 2017, GCC states have sent a total amount of \$551,800 million remittances to various parts of the world (KNOMAD, 2020). In 2017, GCC sent \$119,286 million remittances to various parts of the world. The remittances sent by GCC countries have made a significant contribution to the world. According to Migration and Development Brief published by the World Bank, 4 GCC countries are among the top ten remittances e sending countries worldwide. Among these top ten countries, the United States (\$68 billion) is the highest remittance sending country, followed by the United Arab Emirates (\$44.4 billion) and Saudi Arabia (\$36.1 billion). Kuwait (\$13.8 billion) and Qatar (\$12.8 billion) are eighth and tenth highest remittance sending countries worldwide.

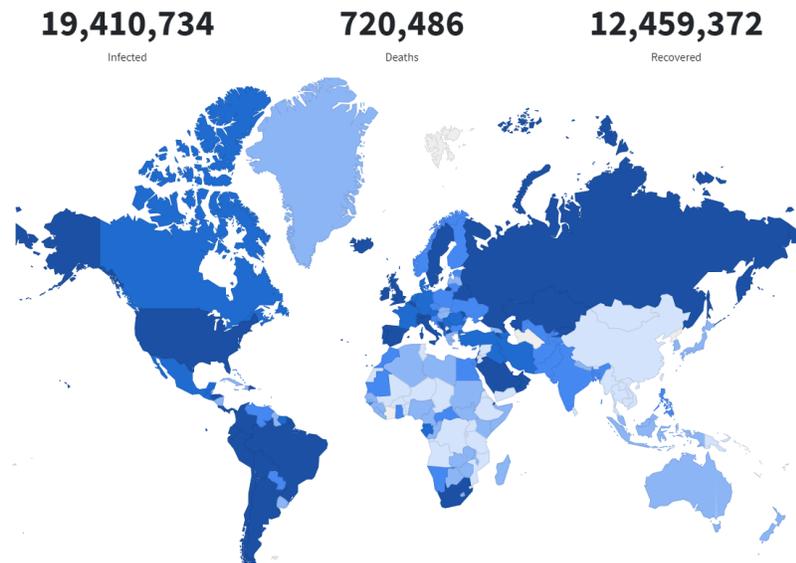
Figure: International Migrant as a percentage of the total population



Source: Map data source: Geospatial Information Section, United Nations. Downloaded from <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimatesmaps.asp?1t1>

COVID 19 has exacerbated and aggravated the already existing economic gaps around the world. Most migrants from the Arab Gulf countries already live in a cramped housing environment, often without adequate access to safe drinking water and sanitation. These workers have hardly any capability to keep isolated from society and are often treated as ‘carriers of disease’. Moreover, during the COVID 19 pandemic, migrant workers from GCC countries became the most vulnerable communities. Besides, as borders begin to close at the end of March 2020, these migrants were forced to isolate themselves in the host countries. With the closure of the economy, companies and families who pay workers’ wages are also in difficulty, putting them in severe economic difficulties.

Fig. Spread of COVID 19



Source: <https://coronavirus.thebaselab.com/>

The COVID 19 pandemic has raised several issues relating to the migrant conditions and vulnerabilities in the GCC, including health and welfare of vulnerable, unemployed migrants during and aftermath of corona crisis; possible changes in the Gulf labour market; policy options to tackle the challenge of return migration in various sending countries such as India, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and others. These issues and many others arising out of the corona crisis need severe discussion and deliberation, engaging governments, academia, and civil society. Against this background, GRFDT, has organized an online panel discussion bringing together leading international scholars to share their views on Gulf Migration During and Aftermath COVID 19.

Major Determinants

“Anyone, anywhere, who is affected by the virus is certainly a cause of concern for everyone everywhere.”

- Shabari Nair, International Labour Organization

Reintegration of Returnee Migrants

COVID 19 will bring back a number of workers from Gulf countries, there is a need to have robust reintegration policy in all sending countries. According to Dr. Ahsan, the issue of reintegration in Bangladesh is mostly on just discussion. The government has not made any financial allocation for reintegration programs. Prof. Rajan while discussing about Indian returnees stated that the reintegration needs financial support from the state, unfortunately however in all the packages announced by the government, there is no mention of international migration. Further, since many people are returning and may be carrying the financial capital for business, they should be provided adequate advice to do so. Government should establish adequate mechanisms to guide investors willing to make financial investment in India.

State governments and the central government to be able to have a clear-cut reintegration policy for the reverse migrants. South Asian countries together can take up with the host countries for the South Asian migrants so that the irregular migrants can be taken care of instead of a regular amnesty all the time.

- Ambassador Manju Seth, India

The Kerala state of India is opening up employment exchange for returnee migrants. These portals will act as collaborator, where employers connect with workers. There is a need to have micro level preparation for the returnee migrant workers. Skill India programme can be an important instrument. Dr. Bilesha informed that the Sri Lankan economy is expected to suffer significantly with the Corona pandemic. Workers coming back to Sri Lanka from the Middle East will create a huge crisis in the local labour market similarly as other countries. According to Dr. Bilesha, unlike normal days, when reintegration is not a difficult thing, this era will pose significant challenges for migrants as well as their families.

Evacuation of Migrant Workers

Migrants stranded in GCC countries are in a dire need of support from home governments. Different countries have already initiated the evacuation. India for instance has now embarked on a journey of perhaps the largest evacuation that the world has ever seen for its migrant workers back to the country through a mission called the Vande Bharath Mission. Similar perspectives are coming from Sri Lanka and Nepal which are also planning on evacuating their migrant workers in phased and procedural manners. In case of Sri Lanka, according to Dr. Bilesha, the country has been doing a good job in terms of repatriation and has recently started the repatriation of people who have been given amnesty in Kuwait. However, it seems that the situation will worsen as out of 137 patients tested positive to COVID 19, 127 were returning from Kuwait.

There is no integration policy in India for the international migrants. There is still a lot of work which needs to be done in terms of Indian perspective.
— Arvind Francis, FICCI, India

Concerning the issue of evacuation from Philippines, Dr. Froilan postulated that there is more propensity to stay than to return and this has been historically proven in the case of Libya where Philippines sent a lot of ships to repatriate Filipinos in 2014. A lot of Filipinos defied that policy and chose to stay because there are no opportunities back home. In the current context of COVID 19, merely 27 000 Filipinos requested to be repatriated out of 3 million. Because many

workers do not want to be repatriated the Philippines' government does not know what to do with them. With the pandemic of COVID 19, they do not have a clear contingency strategy at the moment. The panelist observed that the demand of evacuation may see a significant increase in the coming days. Many people will be requesting for the return. Governments should have adequate mechanisms to discuss with destination countries and make a robust policy beforehand.

The Impact of COVID 19 on Remittances

Remittances are some of the important factors behind migration to GCC countries. The panel speakers showed significant worry about decrease in remittances due to COVID 19. Prof. Ullah mentioned that Bangladesh has been and is going to be one of the hardest hit countries in the world, primarily because the country receives around 15 billion dollars annually which constitutes about 9 to 10 percent of the GDP. These remittances come from around 9 million migrants in the world and out of this, around half of them actually come from the Gulf states. In the specific case of Bangladesh, there is going to be a decline of 20 to 30 percent for remittances and 2 000 000 Bangladeshis are at the risk of losing their job from the Gulf.

What is important in this context is not only to look at mortality rates but also morbidity rate because it is the morbidity rate which is going to affect the economy, the productivity and all these things about remittances and other things that we are talking about which is actually the lifeline of migration from the Gulf.

— Prof. Binod Khadria, JNU, India

Talking about possible remittances decline to India, Prof. Rajan opined that there is a need to talk more about migrants than remittances. Significant concentration needs to be given to migrant workers. Prof. Nasra while presenting the case of Pakistan, suggested that the impact of return is likely to be very widespread both in the rural and the urban areas. Last year, Sri Lanka received \$6.7 billion as remittances. According to Dr. Bilesh, for Sri Lankan economy, remittances play a huge role, considering its micro context. Dr. Bilesh opined that the crisis management has restricted migrant workers to transfer money to home countries. Even though migrant workers had money in hand, they were not able to remit because of the lockdown situation in the Middle East.

COVID 19 and Labour Condition in the Gulf

The working and living conditions in the Gulf during COVID 19 also came to the focus of the discussion. Prof. Ahsan while discussing Bangladeshi migrants in GCC stated that informal accommodations in the GCC countries are not fit for living. At least four people per room live in these tightly packed and cramped accommodations. These cramped rooms create unsanitary conditions and actually do not allow space for social distances, which is the primary framework needed against corona virus. Prof. Rajan mentioned that migrant workers living in GCC countries are forced to live with a temporary status. They are never given any legal status to develop a sense of belonging. Their status as labour cardholders, the issue of nationalization policy in conjunction with the decreasing oil prices in the Gulf force them to return. Differently put, the previously mentioned incentives galvanize the massive return of migrants.

On remittances the numbers are staggering. COVID 19 really has to be understood not only as a short-term health crisis which we really have to deal with, but this is in itself a huge task. I think the international community has come together strongly on that and I think we really have to start looking ahead planning and understanding what measures have to be taken very practically.

— Pietro Mona, Switzerland

The issue of decrease in employment due to oil prices is also a case that concerns Nepal. Because oil prices are going

down, Nepali migrants are getting unemployed in Gulf countries. This employment crisis has made a large pool of people who are forcefully being evacuated by the employers. This has made their condition extremely vulnerable. Even more traumatic is that Nepali government has no statistics about this. On the COVID 19 crisis in the Gulf, Dr. Froilan opined that high share of migrants in the Gulf also constitutes high risks in public health and many Gulf countries are basically struggling to maintain their image. In the long run, it is expected these countries will shift from soft repatriation, which is currently amnesty, into a more hard and mandatory repatriation approach.

The question about drop in remittances is a very interesting one but I think we have to take into account that thousands of workers will be repatriated and there is a huge issue of wage theft. Primarily because workers who will be repatriated will not be given their dues, end of service benefits and others. These workers will be coming back without getting the necessary compensation or dues that they were supposed to be given.

— William Gois, Migrant Forum in Asia

Prof. Gardner argued that the pandemic conditions have shifted some of the fundamental gravity of the urban togetherness. The existing thinking of urban milieu has been changed: proximity is suddenly dangerous. This issue is more important in the specific case of the Gulf where migrants usually work on urban projects

Migrants' health in the era of the corona virus has become an important issue for discussion. Prof. Rajan pointed out that there is a need to have a robust mechanism to handle healthcare issues of migrant workers. Mr. Nair stated that the government of Qatar recently issued a set of guidelines and one of those guidelines particularly said that it does not matter whether someone has a Qatari ID or not. The person will be tested and screened and if needed, the government will provide health care in case of testing positive to the virus.

Migrant Support from Home Country

The role of home country also came to the question during the panel discussion. In the specific context of Bangladesh, Prof. Ahsan informed that, for quite long, government officials were not sensitive about the contagious nature of corona virus. Many Bangladeshi politicians and government representatives gave insensitive comments as if the virus is nothing but some kind of sneezing and cough and thereby people should not worry. These irresponsible comments have sent a signal to the citizens to be fearless and ignorant against the virus.

These migrants are economic heroes but now after COVID 19 they are considered as carriers. So, economic heroes are converted to a carriers of disease.

—Dr. Ganesh Gurang, NIDS, Nepal

There are some countries in the Gulf that have asked Nepali government they want to send back Nepali workers. One such example is Kuwait. However, due to the lock-down, these workers cannot come back. The Prime Minister of Nepal has spoken to the heads of many States in the Gulf countries. These countries have given their assurance. In the case of India, although the government has provided the flights, it has not made any preparation.

State Preparedness and Returnees

There is a significant need of adequate structure to handle the inflow of remittances. According to Prof. Ahsan, in Bangladesh, upon arrival, migrants from the Gulf were kept confined in one building close to the airport for a few days and once they agitated, the administration let them freely move by trains and buses. In the case of India, Prof. Rajan suggested that the current migration return is just a pre-text of actual phenomenon. Millions of workers will be coming back. The actual numbers will be known starting from September to December.

According to Dr. Gurang, it is expected that 25 percent of the one million Gulf migrants will return back. These returnees will not be integrated into the local labour market. These returns will have a huge impact on employment.

Migrants coming from the Gulf are treated as carriers of diseases and cursed. There are many cases of mistreat. Governments should facilitate adequate testing. The distress faced by Nepali returnee migrant workers remains same in other South Asian countries. Mr. Shabari informed that the overall perception towards a returnee worker as a carrier of disease is prevalent in all South Asian countries. In the specific case of Pakistan, Prof. Nasra observed that the returnees will have widespread impact since all these migrants are from different parts of Pakistan. This massive scale of return will also test the strength of the network connections in the weeks and months to come. This will be especially true in situations where expatriates were acting as critical buffers and in case of low-skilled workers in the informal sector.

Dr. Froilan while discussing about the process of Gulf migration from Philippines, suggested that migrants are being treated as liabilities from a state perspective. Sending countries need to integrate a crisis context more vigorously in their migration governance for the long run. Sending countries need also to holistically integrate the local and foreign policy institutions to better prepare themselves in these crisis situations.

Irregular Migration

The consequences of COVID 19 need to be understood in the context of irregular migration. The issue of irregular migration was given significant consideration by the panel members. Prof. Rajan opined that undocumented migrants constitute at least 20 to 30 percent of the South Asian migrants in the Gulf. The number indicates that a parallel shadow labour market is operating, which is still not closed. According to Dr. Gurang, the discussion on irregular migration should not be given emphasis during the process of return movement. All emphasis should be given equal opportunity on humanitarian grounds. With regard to the issue of irregular migration, Prof. Nasra opined that 10 to 15 percent of workers in the Gulf were employed in an irregular capacity. The issue has become important today. Irregular workers in this era of pandemic have become more vulnerable. They may be irregular workers because of visa overstay, run away from the employer or *Azad* visa. These *Azad* visas (term used for irregular migrant status) are very prevalent among South Asian workers. With this visa, workers can work for someone else than their legal employer. Now with the occurrence of COVID 19 pandemic, those in an irregular status will come across difficult situations.

There is a demand and there is a need for irregular worker but we would have to see what needs to happen in terms of changing the labour market in terms of providing flexibility, mobility. There is a need to not take the migrants out of irregularity but also to provide for the flexibility that we are asking for.

— Roula Hamati, CCRM, Lebanon

Prof. Nasra listed five reasons for higher vulnerability of irregular workers:

- Irregular workers would find it hard to hide from the authorities like they have been doing
- The network that supported and protected them will find it too risky to continue such support
- Tracing of COVID 19 contacts may reveal about migrants who might have been sheltered by friends and relatives earlier. In such cases, contacts may not be adequately revealed.
- Sponsors who may have earlier provided certain degree of facilitation and protection would be less likely to be willing to do. So, it is going to be much riskier for them
- The search of high-risk areas seems to have added to this process already because the areas have been sealed off and there are raids of buildings. Therefore, for anyone in an irregular capacity it is going to be really impossible to hide.

COVID 19 and Gender

Each of the South Asian countries have their own strategy for female migration. According to Prof. Ahsan, in 2016 the

Bangladeshi government had the kind of pressure that we have to increase the number of female heads going out so that Bangladesh will not be represented like the one percent female sending country. The number was very low as compared to the Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka or Indonesia. Bangladesh sent female workers even though Bangladeshi females were not ready to go. However, just few months after their departure, all these women workers were coming back without anything. According to Dr. Gurang, many Nepali women workers working in the Gulf are suffering owing to lack of information and awareness. Many of these female workers are pregnant.

In the case of Sri Lanka, according to Dr. Bilesha, previously all migrants from Sri Lanka were females but it was brought down to 33 percent in 2015-16. However, this number is increasing again this year and reached 40 percent. Sri Lanka introduced regulation, with family background report, where mother having a child less than five years would not be able to migrate for domestic work. This was an attempt to bring down female labour migration. In the post COVID scenario, when re-migration will start in a grand scale, there may be a paradigm shift in labour migration recruitment and regulation.

On the issue of women, Prof. Gardner argued that the very factors that make domestic workers so vulnerable is the kafala or the sponsorship system. Their isolation in the households in which they are restricted. These restrictions impose lack of communication with the outside world. Strangely, in the pandemic conditions, that is also a positive right that insulates them from the kind of crowded conditions that many other South Asian migrants encounter in the Gulf states. Their location in the households actually provides them with some modicum of insulation from the vulnerabilities of infection.

Migration Statistics

Migration statistics is an important concern for many countries today. Prof. Rajan mentioned that statistics about

Domestic workers have long been and remain vulnerable in a variety of ways. In the Gulf States, the category of domestic worker includes many women, but also many men (e.g. gardeners, drivers). They do not face the crowded camp conditions that has been integral to the virus's spread in Qatar, Singapore, and elsewhere. Contentions about different vectors and forms of vulnerability is not an attack on the need for attention and concern to gender issues or issues specific to domestic workers. I'm sorry if this point resonates poorly – I'm trying to speak to the viral propensity of crowding in camps.

– Prof. Andrew Gardner

migration from India to the Gulf are not accurate. There cannot be nine million workers from entire India, as his studies of Tamil Nadu and Kerala has estimated that up to four million migrants are from these two states only. The actual number of Indians living in the Gulf will be more than the government estimates. Accurate estimation is a basic need of policy and planning for migrant workers. In the specific case of Pakistan, the issue of statistics remains confusing. Prof. Nasra said that even though India and Pakistan are historically the two most important sources of Gulf migrants, the statistics remain a subject of speculation.

In the case of Sri Lanka, Dr. Bilesh informed, 14 percent of migrant workers are professionals or highly skilled workers and the majority are on the lowest in the distribution scale. In terms of destinations, the Middle East countries account for about 85 percent of Sri Lankan migrants on an annual basis. Among Middle Eastern countries for Sri Lankan

Gulf is a very important destination of Filipino migrant workers. Almost 60 percent of Filipino women are in domestic work in the Gulf states. We can imagine that their life would be quite challenging and probably all these issues of overwork and other expectations will be magnified in the times of COVID 19. These workers are suffering right now but then they know that life in the Philippines is more difficult and so they stay where they are.

–Ellen Sana, Center for migrant advocacy Philippines

The Gulf countries took off on their developmental phase since 1960s and this growth has been primarily propelled with the inflow of migrants from South Asia in particular. Can any Gulf country sustain without these migrants? COVID 19 has paused migrants' contribution at the moment but migrants' re-return to their places of work is inevitable, unless the Gulf phenomena disintegrates, which is unlikely.

- Chandrashekhar Bhat, Former Professor, Central University of Hyderabad

workers, key countries are Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. In 2019, Qatar became the top destination for Sri Lankan.

Re-Migration

The Panel also discussed the future of migration. Prof. Rajan opined that migrants will be going back today or tomorrow. The process of re-migration will certainly start. In 2021, migration will open up and the Gulf is not going to close because there is a strong social network available, especially for people from the Indian state Kerala. Prof. Rajan also opined that soon after the corona crisis, there will be high numbers of return migration. The government should talk about return migration, rehabilitation and re-migration. In relation to re-migration and return to the Gulf, Prof. Nasra said that there is a need to have a careful observation on how the policies of host countries change and how the kafala system reshapes itself.

The overall process of return not only brought the individual but also a financial source for family specifically, and community in general. Mr. Nair stated that Bangladesh received over 18 billion dollars in remittances last year. This is close to six percent of the national GDP. The recruitment cost of Bangladeshi workers is the highest in the region: the average migration cost is four to five thousand dollars per migrant worker. Overall, it should be seen as a huge impact in terms of vulnerabilities of migrant workers. According to Prof. Gardner, in a few years, the crisis of COVID 19 will act as one of the push factors.

I think we ought to take note of the social upheavals that the return of international migrants will cause, even as internal migrants with much less economic power also return to those same states and regions.

—Prof. Kamala Ganesh, Former professor, University of Mumbai

Policy Inputs

- The demand for evacuation may see a significant increase in the coming months. Many people will be requesting for their return. Governments should have adequate mechanisms to discuss with destination countries and make a robust policy beforehand.
- Impact of return is likely to be very widespread both in rural and urban areas. Their absorption in local labour markets needs significant migrant-centric initiative by governments.
- High share of migrants in the Gulf also constitutes high risks in public health and a lot of Gulf countries are basically struggling to maintain their image. Providing all these humanitarian benefits for a lot of migrant workers could really produce a lot of costs. In the long run, it is expected that these countries will shift from soft repatriation to hard and mandatory repatriation approach. Sending countries should be ready for such unexpected emergencies..
- There is a need to have robust mechanisms to handle the healthcare issues of migrant workers. One such example is Qatar. The Qatari government has recently issued a set of guidelines and one of those guidelines particularly said that it does not matter whether someone has a Qatari ID or not. The person will be tested and screened and if needed, the government will provide health care in case of infection. Other GCC countries should also implement similar mechanisms.
- This massive scale of return will also test the strength of the network connections in the weeks and months to come. This will be especially true in case of situations where expatriates were acting as critical buffers and in case of low-skilled workers in the informal sector.
- Migrants are being treated as liabilities from a state perspective. Sending countries need to integrate a crisis context more vigorously in their migration governance for the long run. And also sending countries need to holistically integrate local and foreign policy institutions to better prepare themselves in these crisis situations.
- The discussion on irregular migration should not be given emphasis during the process of return movement. All emphasis should be given equal opportunity on humanitarian grounds.
- Undocumented workers in this era of pandemic have become more vulnerable. There may be irregular workers because of visa overstay, run away from the employer or Azad visa. These Azad visas are very prevalent among South Asian workers. With this visa, workers can work for someone else other than their legal employer. Now with the occurrence of the COVID pandemic, those in an irregular status will face risk and a difficult future.
- The migrants will be going back today or tomorrow. The process of re-migration will certainly start. In 2021 migration will open up and the Gulf is not going to close because there is a strong social network available especially for people belonging to the Indian state of Kerala.
- Soon after corona crisis, there will be high number of return migration. The governments should talk about return migration, rehabilitation and re-migration. These three should be given focus.
- There is need to have a careful observation of how the policies of the host countries change and how the kafala system reshapes itself.
- In a few years, the crisis of COVID 19 will act as a one of the push factors of migrants seeking a remuneration from the Gulf states. There is a need to see the pandemic with the lenses of driver of migration.

Brief Profile of the Speakers

Mr. Shabari Nair,

ILO– DWT, South Asia

Dr. Ganesh Gurung

Chairperson, Nepal Institute of Development Studies, Nepal

Dr. Bilesha Weeraratne

Institute of Policy Studies, Sri Lanka

Prof. AKM Ahsan Ullah

University of Brunei, Brunei Darussalam

Prof. S Irudaya Rajan

Centre for Development Studies, India

Prof. Nasra Shah

Lahore School of Economics, Pakistan

Prof. Andrew Gardner

University of Puget Sound, USA

Mr. Frolian Malit Jr,

University of Cambridge, UK

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